

# The Subjective Import of Moral Knowledge

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## Abstract:

Experience teaches that “knowledge” is more than facts garnered from physical inputs or truth derived from rational discourse. Knowledge is a human construction as we constantly typify what facts nature and society present to us, deciphering them through our own personal and cultural narratives. In itself, this should widen the scope of what knowledge embodies and put us on guard about the distinction between descriptive and prescriptive knowledge. Acknowledging that knowledge is personally and communally represented means that knowledge, empirical and normative, is often justified by the suppositions lying deeply within our cultural histories. These suppositions are the presumptive force employed to authenticate, confirm, corroborate, and substantiate knowledge claims, descriptive and prescriptive. Vindicated by enculturated habits, hewn through tradition and practice, and heralded as the pathway to truth, adjustments and assessment in our thinking is difficult. Yet, when knowledge claims are brought into the public square and undergo communal exposure, adjustments in our thinking is often required. Dialogic communication becomes a necessary means of reassessment and clarification. Consequently, all knowledge bears the imprint of subjective understanding, claims of self-evident principles defining the *a priori* starting places of our conclusions, and the social/cultural perspectives in which rational discourse and normative prescriptions are formed and applied. With an inclination to objectify the sensory and rational (rational empiricism) and cast moral knowledge into the bin of the unstable and impulsive, we often ignore the skewed and hermeneutical nature of both. In this regard, to release moral knowledge from restrictive and reductionist interpretations, a thoughtful reconsideration is required. But, let’s not jump to the conclusion that all that we think and believe are on an equal footing, factually or morally. We should not forget that we are cognitive creatures involved in thinking, reasoning, remembering, recommending behaviors thought of as moral, and building our lives through insightful and creative re-examination.

**Keywords:** civility, connections, culture, descriptive, dialogic process, enculturation, ethnocentrism, ideological principles of orientation, interpretation, knowledge, overbeliefs, postmodernism, qualification, reassessment, representation, social construction of knowledge

## Introduction

Lying on the blurred edges of what is thought of as knowledge and dangling precipitously within humanity’s moral consciousness and with personal and collective sensitivity are the often ignored and misrepresented values that bind the common notion of “humanity” as a moral community.<sup>1</sup> These

values – secular and sacred – represent our moral dispositions or the lack thereof, including the collective and personal ethical ideals and visions frequently expressed theoretically but even more so through everyday communal interactions. Although moral knowledge has been repeatedly dismissed as subjective, intrinsic, and theoretically unstable due to its inability to be harnessed by logic and mathematical precision, many have forgotten the prophetic words of Ludwig Wittgenstein who, questioning much of the mathematical precision of his earlier writings, said, “What we are after in philosophy is ‘the understanding that consists in seeing connections’.”<sup>2</sup>

These human connections are definitive of moral possibility. They are admittedly personal, capricious, and changeable requiring that we lift the veil of our moral assumptions, especially those lying deeply within our cultural histories, and seek a deeper and more universal moral awareness. These connections and concomitant presumptions are fertile and dynamic, often resting comfortably beneath the encrusted topsoil of our cognitive awareness and the reactions to the miscellany of events of our lives. But, as Kurt Baier has said, “As long as those presuppositions are partially hidden by the unconscious emotions that led to their adoption, we cannot think about them for the simple reason that we think *with* them.”<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately, but true, culture is an elusive phenomenon, mostly habitual and often misconstrued, definitive of our values and character. Disclosing these tightly held beliefs, often generalized and without detailed or factual reconsideration, is difficult; being open to the insights and opinions of others even more so. Consequently, morality is a taking stock of personal and communal, experiences – what is perceived and what is considered important. This begins within the moral consciousness and is later evaluated, articulated, and “represented” to others through reason and collaborative experiences. Because conscious as well as unconscious moral insights are found in personal and well as communal judgments, *representation* is a normative quality, cognitively basic, informing and prescribing as well as recognizing and recording, and often revealing a hidden moral grammar.

With no apology for being subjective and as with any other form of discourse – scientific, political, or social – moral discourse begins with certain assumptions hewn from experience and designed to better the lives of everyone. These assumptions are often the unstated and self-evident principles, not only of moral conversation but of moral behavior as well, shaped from the gravel of personal experience and communal exposure. Without them, moral conversation swings thoughtlessly in the arms of ethical relativity and its handmaiden, rational ethical egoism, the view that if my behavior is rational and aims at my own greatest good, then my behavior is right and good, e.g., moral. Thus, looking after my own interests will best promote universal human welfare. This is a functional disposition, often narcissistic, and at times ignoring our human commonality weakening our ability to lift moral awareness to a more inclusive view of humanity as community.

## **1. Thinking in Terms of Relationships**

### **1. A. The Strain of Self-Interest**

Rational ethical egoism is a belief difficult to dispute as personal value is about the formation

of human character. Without attention, our values become self-vouching and self-fulfilling. As children we learn to think with the value impressions received from parents, teachers, religious affiliations, and friends. As these become ingrained and definitive of personal character, they are tightly stitched into our moral fabric and revealed to others in claims of self-authenticity.<sup>4</sup> More often than not, when vouching ourselves to others we are asserting our personal autonomy, dignity, and self-worth. To this reflective attention needs to be given for to be moral is not just about self-esteem, self-worth, and self-interest; it's also a social undertaking which recognizes the self-esteem, value, and dignity of others. This was explained by Kurt Baier as the point of view of morality which looks and treats everyone as "...equally important centers of craving, impulses, desires, needs, aims, and aspirations; as people with ends of their own, all of which are entitled, *prima facie* [on the surface; without extenuating circumstances], to be attained."<sup>5</sup> In retrospect, respect for self and others, personal and institutional integrity, and a commitment to fairplay and justice are learned behaviors which become the presuppositional substance of moral knowledge the chief aim of which is to promote human dignity and the exercise of civility in our daily lives. To becoming more universal and functional, these value commitments require rational scrutiny and public disclosure.

Obviously, being moral or at least asking others to treat us morally is in our self-interest. Most people don't wish to be thought of as unethical or immoral as this notably weakens human communication and is thought by many to be a negative character trait prohibiting positive interactions among individuals, businesses, and political leaders. Being moral is a communal affair requiring balance in goals of self-interest and those that are beneficial to others. This often causes an inner tension and sometimes a breakdown in human relationships. This was realized by our ancient progenitors and led to the formation of what is commonly called the "Golden Rule," an ideal where both love of self and, likewise, for others, was acknowledged and prescribed to reduce the conflict between selfish and unselfish behaviors.<sup>6</sup> Kurt Baier has commented,

Throughout the history of philosophy, by far the most popular candidate for the position of the moral point of view has been self-interest. There are obvious parallels between these two standpoints. Both aim at the good. Both are rational. Both involve deliberation, the surveying and weighing of reasons. The adoption of either yields statements containing the word 'ought.' Both involve the notion of self-mastery and control over the desires. It is, moreover, plausible to hold that a person could not have a reason for doing anything whatsoever unless his behavior was designed to promote his own good. Hence, if morality is to have the support of reason, moral reasons must be self-interested, hence the point of view of morality and self-interest must be the same. On the other hand, it seems equally obvious that morality and self-interest are very frequently opposed. Morality often requires us to refrain from doing what self-interest recommends or to do what self-interest forbids. Hence morality and self-interest cannot be the same points of view.<sup>7</sup>

Baier further said,

Let it be granted then, that principles of behavior can be recommended to everybody if they successfully promote the best possible life for everybody, and that the best possible life for everybody cannot be achieved in isolation but only in social contexts in which the pursuits of each impinge on the pursuits of others.<sup>8</sup>

### 1. B. Relationships: The Connective Tissue of Moral Knowledge

Simply expressed by Fritjof Capra these connections are the human relationships binding life to life unfolding variably as we go about our day to day activities. As pointed out by Capra, thinking in terms of relationships is essentially moral thinking:

I call this new science ‘the systems view of life’ because it involves a new kind of thinking – thinking in terms of relationships, patterns and context. In science, this way of thinking is known as ‘systems thinking’, or ‘systemic thinking’. Thinking in terms of relationships is crucial for ecology, because ecology – derived from the Greek *oikos*, meaning ‘household’ – is the science of the relationships among various members of the Earth Household.<sup>9</sup>

Capra says we are suffering from a crisis of perception,

It derives from the fact that most of us, and especially our large social institutions, subscribe to the concepts of an outdated worldview, a perception of reality inadequate for dealing with our overpopulated, globally interconnected world. This worldview divides and separates us into religions, races, and cultures. Ultimately – as quantum physics [has] showed so dramatically – there are no parts at all. What we call a part is merely a pattern in an inseparable web of relationships.<sup>10</sup>

Using our experienced and learned social understandings, we have become skilled at relying on the empirical and not only in science and industry, but in our everyday lives as well. We also know that within each of us are fertile moral possibilities roaming freely within the social connections definitive of our lives and asking that we extend our moral conversations and our civility to a much wider audience than just our immediate social or political group or just to ourselves. And although subjective, the substance and importance of such moral knowledge and understanding cannot be disputed. Thus, thinking in terms of relationships is presuppositional and rests at the core of moral knowledge and moral behavior. Although moral knowledge is thought to be unstable and thus unfit to be thought of as “real” knowledge, we are certainly aware, given the political and social climate of 2020, that human life is itself unpredictable, built on the habits and cultural values representing cultural diversity spread unevenly around the world.

For centuries, convinced of its necessity, philosophers have tried to fit these insights into theoretical formulas and theologians into their credos. Their logical formulas and religious creeds have provided the presuppositional substance – predetermined and unconditional – as foundations for moral truth and meaning. But as we know, life unfolds in unclear and indefinite ways. Sadly,

but true, we cannot fit our values into a fixed rational or religious formula; life just doesn't operate in this way. Even more difficult is widening our moral horizons beyond self, family, or the narrow confines of religious belief. Moral understanding is an affair of the cognitive mind and human sentiment. This cannot be disputed; but, for sake of clarity and understanding, we must allow our rational and pragmatic insights temper our self-centered values within our communities, workplaces, and political affiliations in an effort to consistently expand our moral awareness and its applications.

And we will be biased, but being moral asks that we work to overcome our prejudices. This is a primary function of morality, of moral knowledge. Social isolation and social fragmentation can be destructive. Feelings of national, gender, racial, or religious exceptionalism more often than not negate our moral vision. Recognizing "humanity" as a moral community, we should make an effort to communicate widely and across barriers, and then come together in moral unification. This seems a natural predilection of a rational mind implied by the moral "ought" which defines its prescriptive nature. Under this umbrella we often fluctuate, seeking clarity and the courage to stand firmly, and recognize the dignity and moral significance of others, all others. When social cohesion and civility are eroded, trust and social isolation are often the results. Extending our moral understanding to others doesn't mean giving up what we believe is of value, but requires collaboration, seeking a common understanding that unites rather than divides, and viewing others, like ourselves, as humanly significant. In itself, moral awareness is presuppositional and foundational, a subjective gathering of experience and understandings the purpose of which is to lift the horizon of our moral knowledge and behavior.

Jean Paul Sartre<sup>11</sup> made it clear, "Man is condemned to be free; because once thrown into the world; he is responsible for everything he does. It is up to you to give [life] a meaning." This is a challenge; a moral responsibility. Sartre believed that we alone are responsible for everything that we really are, and by not exploring the myriad possibilities life presents to us, we alone are responsible for restricting our freedom. "We are left alone without an excuse. . . . Everything has been figured out, except how to live," he said. Yet, Sartre's exposition doesn't tell the entire story as we are forever connected to each other in families and communities. We are not alone! Relationships give life meaning and are foundational to moral knowledge. The freedom to which Sartre referred doesn't exist absolutely, and if it does, only rarely. But be aware, as George Bernard Shaw said, "Nothing can be unconditional: consequently nothing can be free."<sup>12</sup> This doesn't negate the fact of human choice, only accentuates our social and communal connections and concomitant moral obligations. Our decisions, personal and collective, expose the imprint of our mores (ethos) and common humanity. These insights lie at the foundation of moral knowledge, perhaps intuitional and capricious, but are products of human communal living.

### 1. C. The Postmodern Reaction

Also, we may react, questioning whether "moral knowledge" is "real knowledge" and whether the prescriptive dimension of morality has an authentic place in the empirical chain leading to truth

and meaning. Looking back, although reason, logic, and the empirical were thought of as the only paths to knowledge, the postmodern movement<sup>13</sup> shook loose this assumption and with it the idea that “knowledge was exclusive of anything non-factual.” “Postmodernism” garnered the name “fragmentationism” as what is and what is not “factual” now bore the weight of collective reassessment. As Wittgenstein insightfully suggested, collaboration discloses our human connections. This began a new turn in what was considered to be “knowledge,” and it was more than a linguistic turn; it was a turn in how we view others all the while engaging them with respect for their personal histories offering them dignity and the opportunity to share their ideas and opinions. Gradually, but surely, moral knowledge was being lifted from its post-Enlightenment encapsulation as its subjective importance was becoming more apparent.

Thus, in the 2<sup>nd</sup> half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and in many fields – including art, architecture, literature, and philosophy – the soft underbelly of the empirical and logical, as the exclusive interpreters of knowledge, yielded to exposure. Its conclusions as well as its methods were questioned.<sup>13</sup> No longer was knowledge the exclusive domain of science or empirical philosophy. What is and what is not factual was brought under scrutiny with the conclusion that all reality is “interpretation.”<sup>14</sup> This was also a major assumption, generally appropriated, of the many reactions to the Gettier problems.<sup>15</sup> During the past sixty years critical opponents<sup>16</sup> of “scientism” have repetitively upheld knowledge as more inclusive than exclusive and related constitutionally to intuition and personal judgments. Knowledge is acknowledged as a social construction requiring collaboration, prudence, and collective wisdom to officiate heretofore slanted assumptions. These intuitions and judgments are the presuppositions – a priori starting places – thought of by many as self-evident, and guiding both theoretical and pragmatic discourse, scientific or moral. It’s not that “factual” knowledge is considered unimportant, but that all factual inputs bear the weight of explanation and analysis rendering knowledge – all knowledge – partial, subjective, open-ended, and dependent on human communication.

All knowledge, moral and scientific, is strained through the sieve of analysis and interpretation necessitating collective insight to strengthen its clarity and communal applications. This is a burden we are today witnessing in both the scientific and political responses to the Covid-19 pandemic. Notably, when the dialogic process falters, confusion abounds. This we can’t deny. To be effective, collaboration – the dialogic process – seeks clarity and will be respectful of others and open to reassessment and adjustments. Reassessment<sup>17</sup> and seeking the input of others is perhaps the most justifiable path to truth and meaning. The question is, as Baier said, “...whether we can master this process of revising presuppositions in such a way that it may go forward with greater boldness and assurance, freed from all needless obstructions.”<sup>18</sup> What is normally called “factual knowledge,” derived from sensory inputs and experimentation, are not exempt from human interpretation. Thus, to decry moral knowledge as “non-knowledge” – as personal, cultural, and prescriptive resisting empirical verification – is a subjectively skewed assumption prejudicing the knowledge-status of our common values.

## 2. The Comprehensive Nature of Knowledge

### 2. A. Knowledge Inside and Out

According to John Horsfield,

Reasoning is associated with thinking, cognition, and intellect. The philosophical field of logic studies ways in which humans reason formally through argument. Reasoning may be subdivided into forms of logical reasoning (forms associated with the strict sense): deductive reasoning, inductive reasoning, abductive reasoning; and other modes of reasoning considered more informal, such as intuitive reasoning and verbal reasoning. Along these lines, a distinction is often drawn between logical, discursive reasoning (reason proper), and intuitive reasoning, in which the reasoning process through intuition – however valid – may tend toward the personal and the subjectively opaque. In some social and political settings logical and intuitive modes of reasoning may clash, while in other contexts intuition and formal reason are seen as complementary rather than adversarial. For example, in mathematics, intuition is often necessary for the creative processes involved with arriving at a formal proof, arguably the most difficult of formal reasoning tasks. . . . Logic is done inside a system while reason is done outside the system by such methods as skipping steps, working backward, drawing diagrams, looking at examples, or seeing what happens if you change the rules of the system.<sup>19</sup>

Consequently, when closely examined, we discover that knowledge includes not only facts, but information, skills, insights and intuitions, and ideas gained through experience. Some will disagree with this widening definition of “knowledge”; thus, when discussing “the subjective import of moral knowledge,” we could be prodding those with a more empirical mindset into what E.A. Burtt called “an extremely healthy state of skepticism about many of the traditional foundations of their thinking.”<sup>20</sup> Even as this occurs, the value of logic, critical thinking, and scientific validation and predictability cannot be disputed. Correctly understood, these skills are internal to a system, but the choice to use them and evaluate their efficiency requires a human context including the often unexposed habits and beliefs guiding human discourse and life. Notably, empiricists, especially utilitarian moralists,<sup>21</sup> have strayed widely from Wittgenstein’s later writings by diminishing the intrinsic and imaginative mind and what is considered naturally important to human social interactions. And although Wittgenstein is not being elevated as a definitive model, his insight and willingness to reconsider his earlier views prompt our attention.

Acknowledging the interpretative dimension of knowledge doesn’t diminish the importance of reason and consistency. This is not a free pass; moral knowledge and its expansion should not be viewed haphazardly and with the understanding that it is absolute. As a social construction, it must be defined in a way that permits unbiased examination and is compatible with common and historical usage. That is, moral knowledge should itself look to reason and consistency for clarity and understanding. Like any other kind of knowledge, moral knowledge is the process of becoming sensitive to problems, deficiencies, gaps in information and understanding, missing elements, and disharmonies, identifying difficulties; searching for solutions, making guesses, or formulating

measures for improvement and possibly modifying and retesting them; and finally communicating the results. This is a human process as human needs are involved at each stage. If we sense some incompleteness or disharmony, tension is aroused. We are uncomfortable and want to relieve the tension as did Wittgenstein. This is a process of creative and flexible problem solving in the “new normal” now defining our world. Psychologist E. Paul Torrance has said,

Since habitual ways of behaving are inadequate, we begin trying to avoid the commonplace and obvious (but incorrect) solutions by investigating, diagnosing, manipulating, and making guesses or estimates. Until the guesses or hypotheses have been tested, modified, and retested, we are still uncomfortable. The tension is unrelieved, however, until we tell somebody of our discovery. There are many other reasons for favoring this definition. It enables us to begin defining operationally the kinds of abilities, mental functioning, and personality characteristics that facilitate or inhibit the process.<sup>22</sup>

Torrance’s explanation reveals knowledge to be a multiplex of mental and social processes and not tied completely to one method, *a priori* assumption, or another. Knowledge, all knowledge, reveals a flexible dimension informing its dialogical origins. Engaging in this process reveals the importance of human social connections definitive of the ethical life and exposing underlying assumptions and beliefs all of which require investigation and open-ended communication. Clearly, we all have loved and hated, used our emotions to unveil our values, and tapped our insights for clarity searching for paths of consultation and reconciliation. This is a movement of the moral consciousness (insight) working out non-humiliating ways to deal with friends and colleagues, all the while respecting their personal and collective dignity and implying personal and social integrity. The complexities are apparent, and the claims of being subjective and capricious are strong, but intuition, insight, creativity, and imagination cannot be disregarded as common aptitudes of the moral consciousness vital to ethical understanding and living morally. They are situated at the heart of moral knowledge.

## 2. B. The Descriptive/Prescriptive Divide

Yet, yielding to the Enlightenment’s commitment to science and following the lead of Wittgenstein’s early writing,<sup>23</sup> philosophers moved ahead in the 2<sup>nd</sup> half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to elevate rational empirical knowledge and artificially divided “knowledge” into two broad domains: the descriptive and the prescriptive. Appropriately recognizing these two broad functions of knowledge and favoring the more stable – the rational-empirical – their efforts were not disingenuous. Yet, they failed to acknowledge the cultural and social underpinnings of both, lifting the rational-empirical to the pinnacle of what “knowledge” should be while ignoring the normative nature of their own contributions.

Generally assumed was that descriptive knowledge is objective, compliant with the methods of science and supported by the belief that “physics fixes all facts.”<sup>24</sup> The scientific method became a model of objectivity forgetting that “facts,” gleaned from experience or research, include the

stamp of interpretation and their social implications. Prescriptive or what is called “normative” knowledge was thought of as subjective, acquiescent to personal opinions, unsubstantiated facts, and cultural traditions. Much of that is true, but not necessarily so, recognizing that knowledge – factual and moral – have differing functions. In itself, this doesn’t diminish the subjective importance of moral knowledge. That moral knowledge functions in the world is plainly demonstrated by the organization of nations, world health organizations, functioning cities and communities, and families living amid diversity and with respect for the laws that govern society and the goals definitive of the moral point of view.

Plainly, the descriptive/prescriptive division reflects the successes of science, our commitment to it, and the fuzzy logic often found in moral reasoning. Yet, commonsense says that something has gone awry ignoring that knowledge, all knowledge, is a social construction<sup>25</sup> bearing the imprint of our subjective commitments, interpretations of facts conveyed, and continually shaped by personal, social, and cultural values. Both the prescriptive and descriptive carry the weight of personal and collective interpretation and, thus, are not isolated phenomena but handmaidens in the work of moral knowledge creation. Of course, this may be a case of swimming against the tide as the empirical still dominates what is thought to be “knowledge.” This was the case of the later Wittgenstein about whom Ray Monk comments,

His work is opposed, as he once put it, to “the spirit which informs the vast stream of European and American civilization in which all of us stand.” Nearly 50 years after his death, we can see, more clearly than ever, that the feeling that he was swimming against the tide was justified. If we wanted a label to describe this tide, we might call it ‘scientism,’ the view that every intelligible question has either a scientific solution or no solution at all. It is against this view that Wittgenstein set his face.

In his later work, Wittgenstein abandoned the idea of logical form and with it the notion of ineffable truths. The difference between science and philosophy, he now believed, is between two distinct forms of understanding: the theoretical and the non-theoretical. Scientific understanding is given through the construction and testing of hypotheses and theories; philosophical understanding, on the other hand, is resolutely non-theoretical. What we are after in philosophy is ‘the understanding that consists in seeing connections’.<sup>26</sup>

These connections, embodied in our cultural past, yield to a wider view of knowledge, especially moral knowledge. As Terry Eagleton says,

The idea of culture, then, signifies a double refusal: of organic determinism on the one hand, and of the autonomy of spirit on the other. It is a rebuff to both naturalism and idealism, insisting against the former that there is that within nature which exceeds and undoes it, and against idealism that even the most high-minded human agency has its humble roots in our biology and natural environment. The fact that culture (like nature in this respect) can be both a descriptive and evaluative term, meaning what has actually evolved as well as what ought to, is relevant to this refusal of both naturalism and

idealism. If the concept sets its face against determinism, it is equally wary of voluntarism. Human beings are not mere products of their environs, but neither are those environs sheer clay for their arbitrary self-fashioning. If culture transfigures nature, it is a project to which nature sets rigorous limits. The very word ‘culture’ contains a tension between making and being made, rationality and spontaneity, which upbraids the disembodied intellect of the Enlightenment as much as it defies the cultural reductionism of so much contemporary thought.<sup>27</sup>

As noted by Eagleton, the devaluing of the prescriptive dimension of knowledge began when the descriptive and normative aspects of culture began to be separated. Sensory knowledge, based on perception articulated with mathematical or logical precision (rational empiricism), was elevated as the source of all knowledge while insight, intuition, and collective human judgment were “lowered” to what was called the “intrinsic.” With that, philosophy fell into a morass of language analysis with the assumption that truth and knowledge must fit a pre-subscribed analytical form. Historically, this was a comfortable hypothesis, but real life just doesn’t fit this pattern. Little wonder that there was a reaction from many quarters, commonly called “postmodernism,” which expressed a general distrust of grand theories and ideologies. This was a movement characterized by broad skepticism, subjectivism, or relativism; a general suspicion of reason; and an acute sensitivity to the role of ideology in asserting and maintaining political and economic power. Postmodernism may in fact been an over-reaction, but put in perspective, it was a revolt against scientism or philosophical absolutism coupled with the suspicion that freedom, subjectivity, and creativity as engines of human progress were being neglected. It’s not that facts based on sensory information and expressed propositionally are unimportant, but, that the interpretation of facts, insights, and opinions and their allied assumptions were now being advanced as the actual import (substance) of knowledge, particularly moral knowledge.

## 2. C. Knowledge Complexities Revealed

As this exposure became more complete, it was clear that experiential knowledge is full of all kinds of assumptions, biases, and misconceptions. According to William Lane Craig and J.P. Moreland,

The truth is that science is ‘a method’ of inquiry into our world. It is a method of discovery and, as such, is subject to certain a priori assumptions about the world, our minds and truth in general. The practice of science thus rests on certain *philosophical* assumptions. Without implicit acceptance of these assumptions, science cannot proceed.<sup>28</sup>

Psychologists Joseph R. Royce also reminds us that there are levels of awareness indigenous to the cognitive domain bringing into play the various ways facts, experiences, and information are interpreted. Royce says,

The suggestion that men [humans] need to become more aware poses the question of their capacity to 'take in reality. The implication is that they live their lives in terms of highly restricted reality images, that there is much of which they are not conscious.<sup>29</sup>

Royce concludes, "Although the 19<sup>th</sup> century defined psychology as the study of the normal, adult, conscious mind, we are similarly ignorant about so-called conscious processes." Given our ignorance of many of these "so-called conscious processes," we should be wary of any theory of knowledge or cognitivity claiming to be faultless or superior to others. Likewise, any and all theoretical definitions of "morality" should not be accepted at face value either, for what is perceived, thought of, or insightfully reconsidered often remains opaque and vague when taken into the public square. E. A. Burtt reminded us of this problem decades ago saying,

Facts of observation do not always speak an unambiguous message with a clear voice. . . . What is and what is not a fact? Which facts are and which are not relevant to a given problem? are questions whose answers are not simple and obvious. The answer depends on the criteria taken for granted by whoever happens to be observing the facts involved.<sup>30</sup>

In the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, especially among analytical philosophers, empirical-rationalism became the sole avenue to truth and knowledge, science became scientism. And remembering Wittgenstein's insight, we can grasp the meaning of Michael Franz's words, who commented,

Scientism is the ideological perversion of science through reduction to a single method, a method which does indeed have much to offer in the way of enhanced certainty and power – but which also, if declared to be the only legitimate mode of inquiry, entraps the practitioner within the closed and flattened world of an ideology.<sup>31</sup>

## 2. D. Questions Remain

And so we can ask, as did Susan Haack,<sup>32</sup> "What's distinctive about human mindedness?" "What's the relationship between natural and social reality?" and "What has philosophy to learn from the sciences and they from it?" Haack concludes, "More generally, none of the sciences could tell us, and if so, why, science has a legitimate claim to give us knowledge of the world, or how the world must be, and how we must be, if science is to be even possible."<sup>32</sup>

From this discussion is garnered the understanding repeatedly ignored from both sides of the descriptive/prescriptive divide that "knowledge" is a miscellany of external inputs and internal adjustments often colored by cultural habits, assumptions, beliefs, and purposes; a human enterprise of discovery seeking meaning and purpose in the world. Surely, it is blatantly false to assume that logical consistency somehow controls the world of sense-perception and that facts must behave according to the requirements of our rational explanations. On the other hand, it is also misleading

to claim that intuition and belief in all their variance have an undisputed claim on knowledge, especially moral knowledge. Certainly, knowledge, including moral knowledge, is a living and growing affair, often unyielding to measurement, scientific objectification, or even personal experience, and bearing the weight of collective assessment. Neither faith nor reason nor the justifications adopted supporting the conclusions of either always speak in a clear and unambiguous voice. To assume so is to allow our assumptions control the conclusions we set forth as unconditional, absolute, and unbending.

One has to be careful here, for certain assumptions, based on human experience, guide the ethical enterprise. Also, history has demonstrated the blemishes of applied ethics in democratic societies and in so-called moral religions. For example, racism and genderism, both destructive of democracy's moral purposes, are the often hidden habits and suppositions undisclosed in laws and/or religious formulas guiding the democratic process. This, in itself, exposes the need for continual moral maintenance and dialogic civility. As Mamerito Nturanabo says,

The ethics of a society is embedded in the ideas and beliefs about what is right or wrong, what is a good or bad character; it is also embedded in the conceptions of satisfactory social relations and attitudes held by the members of the society; it is embedded, furthermore, in the forms or patterns of behavior that are considered by the members of the society to bring about social harmony and cooperative living, justice, and fairness. The ideas and beliefs about moral conduct are articulated, analyzed, and interpreted by the moral thinkers of the society.<sup>33</sup>

Thus, in both politics and religion, as well as in our community practices, habits and traditions are entrenched – consciously or unconsciously – revealing our biases and prejudices. We usually don't think about them and when pushed to their reconsideration, rationalizations are frequently offered but usually that's as far as it goes. All of this seems to be a "soulless" enterprise denying the social structure of knowledge, be it scientific or sacred, yet, revealing its many-sided nature. We are habitually caught in a logical trap, assuming the answers to our moral problems and permitting our assumptions guide our discussions. As Charles S. Pierce commented, "It is no longer reasoning determining what the conclusions shall be, but the conclusion telling us what the reasoning shall be."<sup>34</sup> About this we should continually be on guard for homogenized language and homogenized thought reinforce each other in a circular fashion even when the circle is small and personal.<sup>35</sup> Suffice it to say, we are not as objective or logical as we assume to be. That is to say, both religion and science, not unlike ethics, often yield heavily to personal, social, religious, and/or political exploitation.

### **Summary and Conclusion**

Looking for respect and a place in the scientific world, analytical philosophers after Wittgenstein sought "knowledge-precision" expressed verbally and cast aside anything that was imprecise and did not fit into a preconceived logical mold. Logical precision and language analysis

(analytics) became the accepted methods of truth and meaning. In 1965, psychologist Joseph R. Royce<sup>36</sup> alerted us to this situation and the uncertainty of knowledge saying that any type of knowledge – referred to generally as sensory, rational, belief-oriented, or intuitive – represents the imprint of personal, social, and cultural rationalizations. Facts and related propositions are important, but the effort to roll all knowledge into a precise descriptive or propositional package ignores how facts are received, rearranged, culturally tainted, and construed. We are, as it were, enculturated creatures and to ignore the assumptions varying across and within cultures, assumptions necessary for deciphering information and applying such in one's everyday world, is to ignore the susceptible nature of knowledge and its hidden meanings.

We have also learned from Roy Woods Sellars<sup>37</sup> and again from E.A. Burtt<sup>38</sup> that our assumptions (presuppositions, beliefs) are the given, the intuitive given, we present to reality that in turn modify reality and often become reality itself. Needless to say, there are many beliefs and assumptions – overbeliefs – guiding our lives. These are a part of our cultural and personal histories. We seldom give thought to these as they are the many unconscious components controlling our thinking. Overbeliefs provide supporting contexts concerning the nature of the world, our place in it, our essential inner nature, our history and institutions, and the framework through which we express and interpret our ideas and their interrelatedness. They are what Henry David Aiken called, “ideological principles of orientation”<sup>39</sup> providing perspective, substance, and assurance to both our thinking and our living. Usually, we are hesitant to reassess them and many times we use them to block substantive dialogue with others. Because they are contextual and/or cultural, often lying quietly behind what we say and do in a penetrating unawareness, they require continuous evaluation and reconsideration. They are the presuppositions (assumptions) we bring to adulthood harvested (many times unconsciously) from our cultural past and existing in the solidified topsoil of our values and behaviors. Presuppositions as culture are the “there” that is “there” but not-yet fully or intentionally realized and openly stated, but sometimes emerge in our conversations with others. For many, getting down to their roots for examination and clarity is difficult and often a troubling task. Most are just unwilling to assess what is considered essential and meaningful in their lives. Assessing one's values is a painful and uncomfortable task.

Indeed, knowledge is a complicated assortment of prescriptive and regulatory insights and understandings often yielding to empirical formulation, but, most notably, susceptible to ingrained customs, cultural and social. To ignore this is to deny our essential humanity leaving barren in our mental soil the untilled habituations that comprise our diversity. Consequently, all knowledge – epistemological and moral – is partial and contingent on or condition by the methods chosen. There is a subjective element in all claims to know or to know absolutely.<sup>40</sup> To question the subjective import of “moral knowledge” misunderstands that moral knowledge, like any other form of knowledge, is dialectic, and that we should prize and support the importance of the relationships involved in communication, collaboration, and the reconciliation of our differences. Moral knowledge,

especially, is dependent on the dialectical process for growth and expansion.

E. A. Burtts warns us of the dangers of our deeply ingrained habits and assumptions saying,

The main danger in using reason is the temptation to identify the essence of reason with some particular set of presuppositions about it. . . One forgets that any theory of reason reflects underlying motives which, when they become the object of clear awareness, may need to be revised. . . Insight saves us from permanent bondage to some limited framework presuppositions – presuppositions about reason as about everything else. Most of us find it impossible to crawl out from under this culturally institutionalized blanket; our habits and assumptions have become deeply ingrained. Indeed, our traditions bind us to the past and unite us, but also put fences around our thinking. Breaching these obstacles is nearly impossible for some and for many, an insufferable alternative.<sup>41</sup>

Burtts is referring to “culture,” which as Terry Eagleton says is the most complex form of self-awareness, but also the most richly unreflective signifying a kind of social unconsciousness. As we have mention, Burtts says it’s difficult to think about our culture and values for we normally are thinking by means of them. Eagleton also points out,

What culture does, then, is distil our common humanity from our sectarian political selves, redeeming the spirit from the senses, wresting the changeless from the temporal and plucking unity from diversity. It signifies a kind of self-division as well as a self-healing, by which our fractious, sublunary selves are not abolished, but refined from within by a more ideal sort of humanity. The rift between state and civil society – between how the bourgeois citizen would like to represent himself and how he actually is – is preserved but also eroded. Culture is a form of universal subjectivity at work within each of us, just as the state is the presence of the universal within the particularist realm of civil society.<sup>42</sup>

Without understanding our common humanity morality loses its meaning and cannot exist. This understanding is foundational to moral knowledge. To be effective, morality, like science, requires an ongoing dialogic process designed to uplift moral knowledge from its values confusion and fragmentation.<sup>43</sup> With this insight we are able to reject reductionist attempts that pigeon-hole knowledge into one form, method or another and embrace the insecurities of the world in which we live all the while seeking among ourselves a fresh horizon of moral awareness and behavior.

Morality is indeed concerned with what we ought to do. It is also concerned with what is “valuable in itself” and “what we should aspire to be” and “how we should aspire to live our lives,” with what Charles Taylor<sup>44</sup> refers to as a “different vision of the qualitatively higher.” And our moral aspirations are not isolated phenomena; the language of social and moral discernment is the language of conversation and dialogue. Charles Taylor reaffirms this insight saying,

This is the sense in which one cannot be a self on one’s own. I am a self only in relation to certain interlocutors: in one way in relation to those conversation partners who were essential to my achieving self-definition; in another in relation to those who are now crucial to my continuing grasp of languages

of self-understanding – and, of course, these classes may overlap. A self exists only within what I call ‘webs of interlocution’.<sup>45</sup>

Agreeing with Taylor, the full definition of the moral person will always involve some reference to a defining community. And again, this stresses the importance of the dialogic process. We learn the language of moral discernment by being brought into an ongoing conversation with others. And this will not be, nor is it always, a procedural ethic designed to fit predetermined or pre-specified epistemological theories, over-determined religious ideologies, or even more pragmatic and utilitarian doctrines with their “homogeneous universe of rational calculation.”<sup>46</sup> Moral knowledge is, in effect, an affirmation of ordinary life with all its scars and blemishes and not only a searching for the roots of respect and integrity, but reaching far beyond to a moral horizon, which is an ascent to a universal affirmation and respect for life, well-being, and the flourishing of others.

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2. Wittgenstein, Ludwig (1953). *Philosophical investigations*, G.E.M. Anscombe and R. Rhees (Eds.), G.E.M. Anscombe (trans.). Oxford: Blackwell. Interestingly, in Wittgenstein’s terms, “It is not only agreement in definitions but also (odd as it may sound) in judgments that is required” (PI 242), and this is “agreement not in opinions, but rather in form of life” (PI 241). Used by Wittgenstein sparingly – five times in the *Investigations* – this concept has given rise to interpretative quandaries and subsequent contradictory readings. Forms of life can be understood as changing and contingent, dependent on culture, context, history, etc; this appeal to forms of life grounds a relativistic reading of Wittgenstein. On the other hand, it is the form of life common to humankind, “shared human behavior” which is “the system of reference by means of which we interpret an unknown language” (PI 206). This might be seen as a universalistic turn, recognizing that the use of language is made possible by the human form of life. (*Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*)
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